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# **Landscape and Identity in Australian Melodrama**

**Patricia Smyth**

Abstract: Nationalist histories of Australian theatre have tended to class nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular melodrama as a tool of British imperialist culture. It is argued that the practice of importing ready-made scripts, most often from successful London productions, resulted in theatre that failed to describe local experience, while limiting opportunities for Australian authors who might, given the chance, have written convincingly about colonial life. Although scripts were frequently 'australianized' by relocating the action to recognizable local settings, this has tended to be seen as a superficial marketing ploy, rather than as the beginnings of a national drama. However, discussion of this issue has so far focused on the textual aspect of melodrama and there has been little attention paid to the issue of stage spectacle and, in particular, the sophisticated and highly illusionistic representations of the Australian landscape that were often the main selling point of these productions. The appeal of these scenic designs should be seen in relation to the significance of landscape to emergent notions of Australian national identity and the particular challenges that the new land presented to settler culture. Landscape spectacle acted as an important site of resistance to the homogenizing effect of a theatre culture dominated by imported melodrama, complicating the notion of a one-way system of imperial imposition.

## **I. Introduction**

Nationalist histories of Australian theatre have tended to class nineteenth- and early twentieth-century popular melodrama as a tool of British imperialist culture.<sup>1</sup> It is argued that the practice of importing ready-made scripts, most often from successful London productions, resulted in theatre that failed to describe local experience, while limiting

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1. As Kate Newey writes, 'In the "radical nationalist" school of Australian theatre history, Bland Holt's australianized melodramas are cast as villains in disguise, imposing world-weary British theatrical forms and practices on the Australian theatre, while the plays of Louis Esson are seen as brave heroes, battling in defence of the virtue of the Australian drama, against imperial invasion from the stages of Britain'. See Kate Newey, 'Popular or Populist: The Great Australian Theatre Debate', in *Defining New Idioms and Alternative Forms of Expression*, ed. by Eckhard Breiting (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1996), pp. 191–99, (p. 191).

opportunities for Australian authors who might, given the chance, have written convincingly about colonial life. Imported melodramas might sometimes be ‘localised’ through the addition of idiomatic speech, and by resituating the action to recognisable local sites. However, this strategy has tended to be viewed as a superficial marketing ploy, rather than as the beginnings of a national drama. ‘Localisation’, writes the theatre historian Richard Fotheringham, was a simple task of substituting ‘local place names for the English ones, the excision of obviously foreign references and the insertion of a few topical local jokes’, work suited, he continues, to a ‘co-operative hack’.<sup>2</sup> This sort of adaptation was, of course, common practice in this period. A notable proportion of plays that appeared on the British and US stages were, for instance, adapted from French titles.<sup>3</sup> However, given the power relations between imperial centre and colonial outpost, Australian localisations have tended to be seen as a form of cultural imposition, glossing over difference.

Fotheringham has argued, moreover, that the problem with melodrama was fundamental: even when locally authored, the plotting and characterisation of the genre were still derived from English models. Whether plays were ‘australianised’ from English texts or locally written, they remained, he writes, ‘heavily dependent on a known paradigm of narrative elements ... determined by imported plays which were the stock-in-trade and featured productions of all companies’.<sup>4</sup> In the portrayal of rural life, this meant an image that had evolved in response to a particularly European experience of rupture and loss in the wake of the Industrial Revolution, and a narrative structure founded upon the contrast between a corrupt capitalist city driven by market values and a

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2. Richard Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), p. 134.

3. See, for instance, Sarah Meer, ‘Adaptation, Originality and Law: Dion Boucicault and Charles Read’, *Nineteenth Century Theatre and Film*, Summer 2015, first published online 26 May 2016, doi:10.1177/1748372715617339.

4. Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama*, p. 128.

‘timeless’ rural utopia inhabited by a benign aristocracy.<sup>5</sup> Such a representation failed, he writes, to address the experiences of a country that had not directly experienced an industrial revolution and whose countryside was, moreover, populated by a Squattocracy that lacked the mythology and paternalist ideology of the English aristocracy. Fotheringham goes further, arguing that the imposition of the ‘symbolic geography and class categories’ of English melodrama was ideological, distorting the reality of local experience, while seeking to sanctify the squatters’ position in the social and economic hierarchy:<sup>6</sup>

In order to imitate and localise these enormously successful stories, Australian authors were obliged to distort Australian society in order to make it fit a pre-existing pattern. The image of the bush as a harsh, hostile environment of fire, flood and famine, in which a number of opportunistic squatters had seized large quantities of the best land ... had to be reconciled with the image of the idyllic and ordered pastoral ...<sup>7</sup>

Both localised and locally authored melodramas have thus been seen as fundamentally European productions, thinly disguised as Australian, but in reality exerting a negative effect on the native theatre culture, and, at worst, embodying a reactionary and anti-nationalist ideology.

However, discussion of this issue has so far focused on the textual aspect of melodrama: structure, plotting and speech. There has been little attention paid to the

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5. Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama*. He argues that ‘The central narrative problem which Australian sporting dramas faced was the strong structural imprint which English aristocratic/agrarian myths had made in the plotting and characterization of the genre’. Fotheringham argues throughout for Australian sporting drama as representative of all imported melodrama: ‘almost every major Australian stage play between the 1870s and 1912 was heavily indebted to English sporting drama’ (p. 127).

6. Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama*, p. 135.

7. Fotheringham, *Sport in Australian Drama*, p. 157. Fotheringham refers to this process as ‘ideological entrapment’.

issue of stage spectacle, yet melodrama was a supremely visual genre – a recurring criticism pertained to its reliance on elaborate settings, costumes and accessories at the expense of the supposedly more elevated aspect of language.<sup>8</sup> Representations of the native landscape in Australian melodrama reached a high level of sophistication during this period, using a combination of painted backdrops, borders, wings and subtle lighting effects. Three dimensional ‘practicable’ elements added to the illusion, as did the liberal use of what are likely to have been real trees, live animals and ‘real’ rain (produced using a device that showered the stage with water).<sup>9</sup> These settings almost always drew praise from critics and applause from audiences, even when the rest of the production failed to please. Their appeal should be considered in relation to the particular significance of landscape to emergent notions of Australian national identity. As scholars attest, landscape was a key site for the development of a colonial identity, as distinct from Englishness or Britishness, during this period.<sup>10</sup> Questions about the nature of the

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8. This criticism was leveled both at melodrama and, more generally, at modern drama, which was felt to have followed its example in pursuing visual effects and archaeologically accurate settings above all else. See, for instance, William Bodham Donne, ‘The Drama, Past and Present’ [1855], in *Essays on the Drama* (London: John W. Parker and Son, 1858), pp. 187–206.

9. It is likely that real trees were used on stage, as is suggested by frequent references to the smell of gum trees, wattle, etc. The staging instructions for Act 2, Scene 2 of Alfred Dampier and Garnet Walch’s *Robbery Under Arms* mention ‘balsamic forest odours’; see Alfred Dampier and Garnet Walch, *Robbery Under Arms*, ed. by Richard Fotheringham (Sydney: Currency Press, 1985), p. 36. It is possible that real fire was used in stage representations of bush fires, for instance, in Arthur Shirley’s *The Breaking of the Drought*, Lyceum Theatre, Sydney, 1902. In any case, a review states that the scene was ‘a fair replica’ of the real thing (‘Theatre Royal, “Breaking of the Drought”’, *Argus*, 9 June 1903, p. 6). For animals on stage, see Margaret Williams, *Australia on the Popular Stage: An Historical Entertainment in Six Acts* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1983), pp. 224, 230. Dampier purchased a machine for producing ‘real’ rain for use in *Robbery Under Arms*, ‘HER MAJESTY’S’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 November 1895, p. 2. Bland Holt also used ‘real’ rain effects in the staging of Arthur Shirley and Ben Landeck’s *A Desperate Game*, first performed at Melbourne Theatre Royal, 26 December 1903, with scenic design by John Brunton. See ‘Theatre Royal: “A Desperate Game”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 26 December 1904, p. 7 for an account of the storm effect.

10. Richard White, *Inventing Australia: Images and Identity, 1688–1980* (Sydney and Boston: Allen and Unwin 1981), pp. 85–109.

landscape and the settlers' relationship to it had a direct bearing both on Australian self-perception and the way in which the country and its inhabitants were regarded internationally. Although Fotheringham acknowledges these stage pictures as on a par with, and certainly more widely viewed than, the productions of the Heidelberg School of artists in terms of their contribution to Australian art and nationalism, he implies that their ephemeral nature prevents further analysis.<sup>11</sup> However, by examining critical responses to landscape spectacle and cross-referencing stage iconography with artistic and cultural discourses, it is possible to uncover a distinctive set of local meanings that cut across the European origins of the genre.<sup>12</sup> In particular the landscapes of melodrama emerge as part of a wider debate in which Australians considered the question of how to acknowledge the distinctive features of their environment, one of which was its potential for harshness, and yet to present it in a manner that suggested a prosperous, forward looking nation.

Recent studies have sought to challenge the traditionalist view of imperial culture as having been imposed, often inappropriately, upon colonial societies, suggesting instead a series of variegated exchanges, and a model of two-way traffic.<sup>13</sup> Stage spectacle has yet to be considered in relation to this discussion, yet scenic design acted as an important site of resistance to the homogenising effect of a theatre culture dominated by imported melodrama. Moreover, though relatively unusual, the cases in which melodrama was

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11. 'It is only the total disappearance of these huge landscapes ... that prevents them from being seen as at least as important a contribution to Australian art and Australian nationalism in their time as the work of the Heidelberg school of landscape artists. Certainly the stage pictures were far more widely and popularly viewed'. See Fotheringham, *Australian Sporting Drama*, p. 123.

12. This article is concerned with the significance of stage landscape to debates about a new sense of national identity as opposed to Englishness or Britishness. For an approach to scenic design that focuses on the inscription of colonial values on the landscape, see Anita Callaway, *Visual Ephemerata: Theatrical Art in Nineteenth-Century Australia* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 2000).

13. See, for instance, Veronica Kelly, *The Empire Actors: Stars of Australasian Costume Drama 1890s–1920s* (Strawberry Hills, NSW: Currency House, 2010).

exported in the other direction, from Australia to Britain, complicate the notion of a one-way system of imperial imposition. Landscape melodrama provided the opportunity to perform an emergent sense of Australian national identity on the global stage, and, in particular, in London as the imperial capital. As Richard White has explored in an article on the behaviour of Australian visitors to nineteenth-century London who used the ‘cooe’ to locate each other amid the teeming crowds of the metropolis, confrontation with the capital provided the opportunity to assert a distinctive national identity. White describes how a functional bush call, when transferred to London, became an expression of explicit ideas about ‘the character of Australians as distinct from the English’, and a ‘forceful assertion of legitimacy’ at the heart of empire.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, to realise an image of the bush on the London stage was to present British audiences with a potent image of Australian difference. However, it appears that Australian landscape spectacle may have been too fraught with complex local meanings for a comparable interaction to take place. While it answered the particular needs of domestic audiences, the success of melodrama abroad depended on its ability to broker an image internationally in a market more concerned with exoticism and sensation than with the subtleties of local experience.

This article explores a series of case studies from 1890 to 1907, the period leading up to and following Federation in 1901. The examples chosen include home-grown melodramas, such as Alfred Dampier and Garnet Walch’s popular bush-ranging drama, *Robbery Under Arms*, which, following home success, was later toured by Dampier’s theatre company in London with only moderate success. I also consider a vision of Australia made palatable for English audiences in the Drury Lane production of *The Duchess of Coolgardie*, and Dampier’s Australian adaptation of this play, for which he drew from his previous representation of the Australian desert in *To the West*. Finally, I

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14. Richard White, ‘Cooees Across the Strand: Australian Travellers in London and the Performance of National Identity’, *Australian Historical Studies*, 32:116, 2001, pp. 109–27, (pp. 116–17).

examine an ‘australianised’ play, *The Breaking of the Drought*, written by English author Arthur Shirley, and produced by the Australian actor-manager Bland Holt, having been adapted for local audiences by the Melbourne author Edward Dyson.

While some of the theatre workers cited here are still well known, the names of the scenic designers themselves are less familiar. Although they were often cited in the publicity for plays and singled out for praise in reviews, it would nevertheless be inappropriate to cite single authorship in the same way as one might if discussing a painting. We do not know, for instance, how far scenic artists collaborated with either playwrights or managers, or, indeed, with stage machinists, who were sometimes separately responsible for special effects, in the conception or realisation of stage spectacle. Subsequent productions of a particular play might employ a different artist, resulting in new scenery that would bear a relationship not only to the previous staging, but also to the playwright’s original instructions as recorded in the script. In addition, two or more designers were frequently credited with the scenic design of a given production, and it is often difficult to distinguish the responsibilities of each. Among the scenic designers I consider here are the French artist, Alfred (‘Alta’) Tischbauer, who worked for the Dampier company at the Alexandra Theatre, Melbourne, before leaving in 1893, and the English artist John Brunton, who worked as Bland Holt’s designer until his death in 1909 forced Holt to retire from management, claiming that he could not find an adequate replacement.<sup>15</sup> I also touch on the work of the German artist John Hennings. Older than Tischbauer and Brunton, and already an established figure in scenic design,

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15. Harold Love, ed., *The Australian Stage: A Documentary History* (Sydney: University of New South Wales Press, 1984), p. 116.



Hennings produced new scenery for Dampier and Walch's *Robbery Under Arms* in 1896 following the departure of Tischbauer.<sup>16</sup>

## II. Landscape and national identity

At first glance, some contemporary accounts appear to uphold the view that the landscapes of Australian melodrama functioned as mere backdrops to what remained essentially Old World narratives. For instance, a review in the *Bulletin* newspaper of *The Squatter's Daughter; or, the Land of the Wattle*, which premiered at the Melbourne Theatre Royal in 1907, took manager William Anderson and writing team Bert Bailey and Edmund Duggan to task over the manner in which the Australian settings of the play had been unthinkingly substituted for the stock sites of English melodrama:

Every bit of the structure has been taken from the stock of Andersonian imported bellowdramas with which Bailey and Duggan are familiar, the scene only being changed from England to Australia. Instead of the squire's country house we get the squatter's homestead ... The hero and heroine respectively are lured and abducted to the Jenolan Caves ... and Waterfall Gully instead of to the Thames Embankment and Seven Dials.<sup>17</sup>

'Stripped of its Australian disguise', wrote the reviewer, 'the play is a mere compilation of stale foreign trash'. Such views are in keeping with the *Bulletin's* nationalist agenda; despite its popularity with audiences, Anderson's brand of Australian melodrama is here deemed as misrepresentative, bearing only a superficial resemblance to its subject. Putting to one side the question of whether transferring the locale from the urban wilds of the metropolis to the ancient network of Jenolan caves was quite as unmeaning a

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16. Hennings, Tischbauer and Brunton are all recorded as having exhibited their paintings as professional artists. Anita Callaway explores the training and production practices of scenic designers in Callaway, *Visual Ephemeria*.

17. 'Bulletin, 14 February 1907', in *The Australian Stage*, ed. by Love, p. 147.

transposition as is here suggested, what is notable about this review is the distinction made between the action of the play and its setting.<sup>18</sup> While the writer deplored the former, he or she was unable to hold back praise for the latter, citing the faithfulness of the localised settings, attributed to ‘scene-painter Robbins, and the carpenter, and the powers behind the scenes’. The reviewer cited in particular the Waterfall Gully scene, which they deemed ‘a masterpiece of realism’, and the lighting effect in the Eucalypti Gorge Scene:

The moon rises on the impressive spectacle, and the more it rises the blacker falls the night – the eccentric Australian night. Presently, next day’s dawn is announced by a number of crimson clouds which light the world on behalf of the unseen sun.<sup>19</sup>

Though clearly moved by the sense of recognition experienced in witnessing this representation of the Australian nightfall, the author nevertheless appears to have regarded the set design as an empty, albeit impressive, spectacle. The setting is merely a ‘disguise’; the meaning of the play, it is implied, resides not here but in the spoken aspect of the drama.<sup>20</sup> And yet landscape was a fraught subject during this period. Whether overtly acknowledged by critics or not, the mere act of recognising and appreciating characteristic atmospheric or climatic effects was linked to a new sense of national consciousness.

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18. For the transposition of gothic tropes to an Australian context, see the recent exhibition at the Ian Potter Museum of Art, Melbourne, *Weird Melancholy: The Australian Gothic*, 2 April to 9 August 2015. Exhibition curator Suzette Wearne explores connections between the birth of the Gothic genre in Europe and Australian settlement. Article by Lisa Power, ‘Weird melancholy: exhibition probes fear at the heart of the Australian landscape’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 3 April 2015.

19. ‘*Bulletin*, 14 February 1907’, *The Australian Stage*, ed. by Love, p. 148.

20. As the reviewer of *The Squatter’s Daughter* quoted above recognised, this particular effect was taken from George Musgrove’s Australian adaptation of a Manchester production of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. ‘*Bulletin*, 14 February 1907’, *The Australian Stage*, ed. by Love, p. 148.

The importance of landscape to the Australian psyche stems from mythologies surrounding the early settlers' negative response to the appearance of the new land, and also to what they perceived as its harshness.<sup>21</sup> In its lack of verdure and supposed monotony, the landscape contrasted with European notions of picturesque beauty, a difference that settlers apparently found alienating. It would later become a cliché of Australian art history that the foreign artists who painted the first colonial landscapes dealt with its peculiarities by making it conform to a set of imported European models, the corresponding cliché being that only those born in Australia were capable of seeing it truly, without the baggage of European expectations. The ability to appreciate the beauty of the bush on its own terms thus became seen as a marker of 'authentic' Australianess.<sup>22</sup> In seeking out and celebrating those features perceived as most distinctively Australian, scenic designers were laying claim to an emergent notion of national identity; moreover, the theatre provided a site in which urban spectators could publicly demonstrate their own familiarity with, and feeling for, the landscape through the practice of greeting each succeeding scene with thunderous applause in appreciation not only of the splendour and ingenuity of the stage spectacle, but also its accuracy.<sup>23</sup>

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21. Paul Makeham explores the relationship between the intractability of the landscape and constructions of Australian national identity in his study of early twentieth-century stage landscapes in the work of Louis Esson, Katherine Prichard and Millicent Armstrong among others. Paul Makeham, 'Across the Long, Dry Stage: Discourses in Australian Drama' (PhD diss., University of Newcastle, NSW, 1996), p. 5.

22. Bernard Smith dates the notion that only the native born artist is truly able to appreciate the beauty of the Australian landscape to the period following the economic depression of the 1890s; see Bernard Smith, ed., *Documents on Art and Taste in Australia 1770–1914* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. 233. However, White argues convincingly that its origins are with the 1890s generation of writers for the nationalist *Bulletin* newspaper, and the artists of the Heidelberg School; see White, 'Bohemians and the Bush', p. 106.

23. For instance, 'the scenery is complete and natural even to the smallest detail. The work of Australia's premier artist, Mr John Brunton, brings out thunders of applause each evening, particularly so when the bushfire scene is laid on'; see 'Theatre Royal Bland Holt's Season', *Quiz*, 22 May 1908, p. 8. Also, 'the audience cheered loudly as the curtain rose on each new place', quoted in 'Lyceum Theatre. The Breaking of the Drought', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 December 1902, p. 8.

There were, however, anxieties about the hostility of the environment, the aridity of the country's inland areas and its susceptibility to flood, fire and drought. As Bernard Smith has written, '[d]uring the second half of the nineteenth century an image of Australia as a country that taxed human endurance to the limit developed and spread'.<sup>24</sup> Such a perception was likely to affect not only the flow of migrants to Australia but also the country's international trade reputation. The challenge for those involved in creating stage landscapes was to celebrate the distinctive qualities of the new land, while presenting it as a place in which settlers could forge a happy and prosperous existence.

One approach to this problem, and, as I discuss below, the most influential for landscape melodrama, was that developed by the novelist Marcus Clarke, who famously identified the 'dominant note' of the Australian landscape as 'weird melancholy'.<sup>25</sup> Clarke explored his ideas in a series of writings beginning in the 1860s, in which he focused on those aspects considered most challenging to the settler community, such as the emptiness of the unsettled regions, the absence of historical associations, and the hostility of the climate, citing Australian place names as testaments to the despair of thwarted explorers who had set out in search of an inland sea: 'Mount Misery, Mount Dreadful, Mount Hopeless'.<sup>26</sup> One of the most pervasive themes to come out of Clarke's writing was the notion of the 'haunted' landscape, in which the silence and loneliness of the outback become filled with 'nameless terrors'.<sup>27</sup> While this idea has subsequently been linked to the settlers' guilt regarding the treatment of Aborigines, it can also be understood as anxiety in the face of the unimaginable age of the landscape, which prompted a disturbing awareness of the flimsiness of settler civilization. Despite his

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24. Smith, ed., *Documents on Art and Taste*, p. 128.

25. See, for instance, Marcus Clarke, 'The Weird Melancholy of the Australian Bush' [1874], in *Documents on Art and Taste*, ed. by Smith, pp. 132–40.

26. Clarke, 'Weird Melancholy', p. 138.

27. Tim Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition: Australian Landscape Painting, 1801–1890* (Oxford University Press Australia: Melbourne, 1985), p. 127.

tendency to dramatize this sense of alienation, Clarke offered a way to appreciate the unique beauty of the land, which he described as majestic in its indifference to its human inhabitants, writing in one passage of how the settlers' 'trim utilitarian civilization shrinks into insignificance beside the contemptuous grandeur of forests and ranges coeval with an age where European scientists have cradled their own age'.<sup>28</sup>

Theatrical spectacle also shared some of the concerns of the Impressionist influenced Heidelberg School of artists, whose members came to maturity in the mid 1880s and 1890s. The Heidelberg School's interest in atmospheric effects and *plein-air* practice bears the obvious imprint of modern European painting; however, in an Australian context, where the climate, and especially the quality of the light, was regarded as a key distinguishing feature of the environment, their fascination with light and colour took on a particular, local significance. Though popularly known for their scenes of bright, midday sunshine, they explored a range of seasonal light effects at different times of the day and night, taking a particular interest in moonrises. Landscape melodrama was, as is suggested by the *Bulletin's* account of *The Squatter's Daughter* quoted above, equally concerned with light effects, both regional and pertaining to different times of day. Further references to this type of highly nuanced lighting effect include a review of Dampier and Walch's *Robbery Under Arms* that gives a vivid account of the settings by scenic designer 'Alta' (Alfred Tischbauer), describing the scene showing the 'Rocky Rises at evening' as 'an open sandy space, surrounded by tree ferns and forest land, with huge cliffs rising abruptly behind, their lofty face bathed in the rosy glow of the setting sun'.<sup>29</sup> A later 'bush scene' was also thought worthy of mention for the way in which the light was shown 'falling strongly on the distant view, to which it imparts a certain hardness of

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28. Clarke, 'Weird Melancholy', p. 135.

29. 'Amusements "Robbery Under Arms"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 November 1891, p. 6.

effect quite true to nature in this part of the world.’<sup>30</sup> Indeed, Dampier’s scenic designers seem to have had a particular flair for such effects, for his version of *The Bush King* was similarly praised for a ‘scene of the big scrub with the semi-tropical glow of Queensland’.<sup>31</sup>

Melodrama thus drew on two key approaches to nineteenth-century landscape: Clarke’s notion of ‘weird melancholy’, and the regionalism and subtle lighting effects of Australian Impressionism. This is, perhaps, a surprising combination of influences, given that these two modes are generally regarded as representing opposing ideas about the nature of the landscape. In his book *Inventing Australia* Richard White explores increasing hostility to Clarke’s ideas in the decade prior to Federation in 1901. He situates this feeling in a new generation that included the Heidelberg school of artists, all of whom were either born in Australia or had emigrated as children, and whom he describes as resistant to Clarke’s understanding of the landscape, which they regarded as a gloomy, outsiders view.<sup>32</sup> The sense of confrontation between opposing visions that White describes corresponds to wider debates about the nature of the Australian landscape. As the literary scholar John McLaren has written, ‘[s]ince the nineteenth century, Australian art and writing has had a double vision of the country; as a sunny land of opportunity, and as a place of loneliness and loss’.<sup>33</sup> To regard the Heidelberg artists as offering a straightforwardly optimistic vision of Australia as a sun-filled, health-giving utopia would

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30. ‘Amusements “Robbery Under Arms”’, p. 6

31. ‘Alfred Dampier Co. The Bush King’, *Kalgoorlie Miner*, 9 November 1901, p. 4. This Australian version was re-written by Dampier with Lincoln. The London version of this play of which Lincoln was sole author was produced at the Royal Surrey theatre in 1893 and was described in the *South Australian Register* as ‘a libel on Australian life as it is’. The author continued that a play at the Gaiety had recently been cut for fear of offending the Turkish Ambassador and argued that it was just as important for international relations that ‘the English people should not be misled as to Australian life’, ‘Anglo-Australian Gossip: From our own correspondent’, *South Australian Register*, 16 December 1893, p. 9.

32. White, *Inventing Australia*, pp. 105–6.

33. John McLaren, ‘A Haunted Land’, *Australian Studies*, 20.1, (2005 [published 2007]), pp. 153–68, (p. 153).

be a simplification; they were, as noted above, just as interested in portraying moonrises as in describing the sunlit scenes for which they would later become most known. However, it is true that while Clarke had confronted the perceived strangeness and hostility of the environment, the new generation looked instead to familiar, quotidian landscapes of cultivated suburban farmland. This 'double vision', and the question of which of these two versions of the landscape represented the authentic view, had implications about the nature of the Australian people themselves. The vehemence with which some of the new generation of nationalist writers attacked Clarke's ideas pertains to the perceived connection between landscape and national character, which was a prevailing feature of nineteenth-century thought. If Australia was deemed a melancholy landscape, then it might be thought to follow that the national character, too, was gloomy and melancholy by nature. While these two views were often framed as opposing positions in literary and artistic discourses, both modes were employed in popular melodrama, often within the same production. In a play such as *The Breaking of the Drought*, for instance, scenes of pastoral plenty were alternated with disturbing images of drought. Even in Dampier's landscape melodramas in which Clarke's notion of the weird and otherworldly landscape predominates, variety is still key to the manner in which the environment is portrayed. In juxtaposing diverse terrains and climatic effects, melodrama was able to represent a uniquely changeable and ambivalent landscape, acknowledging the harshness of the environment while celebrating its beauty.

Melodrama was also, despite the commercial imperatives of the genre, at the experimental forefront of evolving attitudes towards the most challenging types of terrain. The desert is now a globally recognised national icon, 'the most exported image of Australia'; however, as Roslynn D. Haynes has explored in her book, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film*, its current status would once have been unthinkable, regarded, as it was, as an empty, desolate wilderness. The reimagining of the

desert as ‘the ultimate “other”’, and as a space of spiritual enlightenment and transcendent beauty is generally regarded as a twentieth-century phenomenon.<sup>34</sup> Yet, as I will show, melodrama made early essays into the representation of this difficult subject, anticipating developments that have generally been linked to later changes in attitude, and also to technical innovations such as the advent of film – in particular, colour film – and its ability to capture light-filled expanses.<sup>35</sup>

### III. The melancholy landscape: *Robbery Under Arms*

Though the theme of the melancholy landscape was on the decline in painting by the 1880s, it was still going strong in stage landscapes such as those designed for Dampier and Walch’s *Robbery Under Arms*, first produced in Melbourne at the Alexandra Theatre in 1890, initially with settings designed by Alfred Tischbauer, and from 1896 with new scenery by the celebrated scenic artist John Hennings.<sup>36</sup> The play was an adaptation of Rolfe Boldrewood’s novel of the same name, and in one sense Boldrewood must be regarded as the creative intelligence behind the stage spectacle, for the staging instructions were largely taken directly from the book. Boldrewood’s descriptions are, in turn, clearly indebted to Clarke’s notion of ‘weird melancholy’. This is evident, for instance, in the description (which appears in both novel and staging instructions) of

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34. Roslynn D. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre: The Australian Desert in Literature, Art and Film* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 3, 87.

35. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 4.

36. On the theme of melancholy in nineteenth-century landscape painting, see Bonyhady, *Images in Opposition*, pp. 133, 126. Hennings appears to have designed new scenery for *Robbery Under Arms* in 1896. However, the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* states that he carried out his last significant work in 1892, *The Cyclorama of Early Melbourne*. See Mimi Colligan, 'Hennings, John (1835–1898)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, National Centre of Biography, Australian National University  
<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/hennings-john-12976/text23451> [accessed 21 September 2015].  
 Tischbauer and Hennings are the two most celebrated scenic designers to have worked on *Robbery Under Arms*; however, other artists are also cited as having designed settings for the play.



‘Terrible Hollow’ (Act 4, Scene 1 in the play), a site described as resembling a dried up sea bordered by steep sandstone walls:

... the whole valley looks as if it had been an arm of the sea at some time or other, a bit like Sydney Harbour in shape ... Even the sandstone walls by which the whole affair great and small was hemmed in, was just like the cliffs about South Head. There were lines too, on the face of them, just like where the waves had washed marks and levels on the sea-rock.<sup>37</sup>

In calling to mind an ancient inland sea, long since disappeared, Boldrewood’s description, which was realised in Dampier’s production, presents an obvious Clarkian motif, suggestive of deep time. Clarke’s influence is also seen in the portentous sounding place names of the play, such as the aforementioned ‘Terrible Hollow’, and also ‘The Black Stump’, which became the setting for Act 4, Scene 2. In subsequent productions, however, it seems that the designers’ vision continued to develop independently of the novel. Boldrewood’s locations had been inventions, but publicity for later performances offered scenery taken ‘from photographs and ... from nature, of the places actually inhabited by the gang of bushrangers of that period’.<sup>38</sup> In any case, Dampier and Walch did not, even in the first instance, adhere slavishly to the settings as portrayed in the novel. In some scenes, images from other parts of the book are repurposed, and embellished. For instance, Boldrewood describes the protagonists’ macabre discovery of the bodies of four dead bounty hunters as taking place against a backdrop of blackened sky, sudden storm and wailing wind. The playwrights used this setting for Act 4, Scene 5 in which the bushrangers are captured and Starlight, the hero, is shot, believed killed. The

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37. Fotheringham, ed., *Robbery Under Arms*, p. 77. The staging instructions are in the form of a direct quote from Boldrewood’s novel.

38. ‘Amusements: Opera House, Dampier Dramatic Company’, *Brisbane Courier*, 10 February 1894, p. 6.

image is developed in the stage version through the addition of 'long grey tussock grass' and a vast, featureless plain:<sup>39</sup>

Bush country – (Extent) Long grey tussock grass. Trees untouched. Primeval giants. Vast plain at back. A weird and witch-like scene. The wind rises and wails stormily. Noise of wind whistling through trees. Leaves fall ...

... The sky is suddenly overcast. The plain is blotted out by driving mists and almost without warning, one of the sudden storms of the region, breaks over the plain. Drenching rain, blinding lightning, rolling thunder.

Dampier and Walch thus developed the Clarkian tone of Boldrewood's written description, adding features considered to be distinctively Australian and emphasising the monotony of the landscape, which had supposedly so unnerved the early settlers. Like the 'Terrible Hollow' setting of Act 4, Scene 1, the reference to 'primeval' trees also reflects Clarke's fascination with the reminders of deep time on the landscape.

Dampier's spectacle was popular with Australian audiences, who are recorded as having heartily applauded each succeeding scene of bush landscape as it appeared on stage.<sup>40</sup> The following response from the critic for the *Advertiser* was typical. The scenery

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39. 'The sky, which was bright enough when we started, clouded over, and in less than ten minutes the wind rose and rain began to pour down in buckets, with no end of thunder and lightning. Then it got that cold we could hardly sit on our horses for trembling. The sky grew blacker and blacker. The wind began to whistle and cry till I could almost swear I heard some one singing out for help. Nulla Mountain was as black as your hat, and a kind of curious feeling crept over me, I hardly knew why, as if something was going to happen, I didn't know what.' Rolf Boldrewood, *Robbery Under Arms*, Chapter 37

<<http://www.telelib.com/randomverse.php>> [accessed 7 October 2015]. The description of this portentous landscape precedes the discovery by Dick and Jim Marston of the dead bodies of the bounty hunters in chapter 38. The last part of the stage instructions for this scene relates to some new machinery that Dampier bought in 1893 to create real rain on stage and it is used here to create a particular regional climatic effect.

40. The *Argus* review of the first production in 1890 tells us that 'Every canvas affording a fresh glimpse of Australian bush scenery was applauded as it came into view', *Argus*, 3 March 1890. For the symbolism of

was, he wrote, ‘an irresistible source of attraction ... the thunderstorm with its vivid lightning flashes and pouring rain’ offering ‘convincing realism and fidelity to nature’.<sup>41</sup> Dampier’s plans for the play went beyond home success, however, and, having first advertised for a London theatre to host the play in 1890, he finally produced *Robbery Under Arms* at the Princess’s Theatre, London in 1894.<sup>42</sup> His aim in so doing was, as Fotheringham explains, to establish a reciprocal relationship with England through the exchange of theatrical productions, an ambition which, he continues, was ‘neither republican nor even national in any genuine sense of the term’, but rather reflected the common view ‘that the silken bond of friendship between Australia and England would be strengthened by the successful production of plays about Australia on the London stage’.<sup>43</sup> However, the act of presenting such a potent image of colonial identity to a London audience signified more than a friendly overture. It could not but represent an attempt to convey Australian difference, in terms of the land itself and the experience and character of its inhabitants. However, the London production did not achieve anything like the success it had achieved at home.

There are other factors besides the issue of stage spectacle that would certainly have affected the reception of the play in London. A number of reports refer to its having been hastily put together, and the play as performed in London differed from the

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the locations described in Boldrewood’s book see Peter Pierce, “‘Weary with travelling through realms of air ...’: Romance Fiction of “Boldrewood”, Haggard, Wells and Praed’, *Westerley*, 2.1, (June 1987), pp. 79–90. Pierce considers sites such as ‘Terrible Hollow’ in the context of anxiety about Empire and Australia’s place within it.

41. ‘Amusements: Theatre Royal’, *Advertiser*, 3 February 1897, p. 5.

42. Advertisement, *Stage*, 25 April 1890, p. 20.

43. Fotheringham, ed., *Robbery Under Arms*, p. xxv. ‘establish a reciprocity of theatrical enterprises with the old world’, Dampier’s speech at his benefit matinee at the Princess’s Theatre, 25 June, reported in the *Age*, 27 June 1892, p.6, in *Robbery Under Arms*, ed. by Fotheringham, p. xlv. Dampier is recorded as saying that he hoped to tour several plays in London, although only *Robbery Under Arms* reached production, see the *Age*, 27 June 1892, p.6, in *Robbery Under Arms*, ed. by Fotheringham, p. xlvii.

original in that the English actress Mrs Anna Ruppert, who was leaseholder of the Princess's Theatre, took on the role of Aileen, which was usually played by Rose Dampier.<sup>44</sup> However, it is notable that the settings, which had been the play's main draw in Australia, drew hardly any remarks. Reviewers' comments tended to be laudatory, but unspecific, one critic stating vaguely that the 'scenery is most scenical'.<sup>45</sup> While home audiences had been thrilled by the sense of authenticity they perceived in the portrayal of the Rocky Rises and Terrible Hollow, London audiences seemed not to know how to react. The reviewer for the *Sporting Times* informed readers that the 'scenery was all ... brought over from Australia, and is said to be true to colonial nature', suggesting that he or she lacked a point of reference by which to test the accuracy of the settings.<sup>46</sup> The variety of different types of terrain and weather effects in *Robbery Under Arms*, though appealing to the pride of local audiences, may have confused the London public, for one review was actually critical of the scenery, citing the variety of the spectacle as a fault rather than a virtue: '[t]he scenic element is excellent, though overdone. The change of *locale* is too frequent, and ends by tiring'.<sup>47</sup> For this critic, having failed to understand their significance, the settings appeared only as pointless spectacle. As I will show in reference to *The Breaking of the Drought*, for Australian audiences, still negotiating a relationship with what was for them a new kind of environment, the variety of the landscape was key to its portrayal. For international audiences, however, national landscapes had to offer an instantly recognisable image that corresponded with the spectator's mental image of that

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44. Fotheringham, ed., *Robbery Under Arms*, p. xlviii. 'In an incredibly short time special scenery – and capital scenery too – had been painted from sketches made in Australia beforehand, and after a week's closure of the Oxford St house they were ready to come up and smile across the footlights', 'Music and the Drama. Robbery Under Arms.', *Queenslander*, 22 December 1894, p. 1176.

45. 'Waftings from the Wings', *Fun*, 6 November 1894, p. 190.

46. 'PRINCESS'S THEATRE – "ROBBERY UNDER ARMS."', *Sporting Times*, 27 October 1894, Issue 1623, p. 3.

47. 'PRINCESS'S THEATRE', *Morning Post*, 23 October 1894, p. 5.

place, and, given the perceived link between landscape and character, also the nature of its inhabitants. While answering the needs of local audiences for a spectacle that reflected the complex feelings of settlers towards the land, Dampier's stage spectacle may simply have proved too subtle for London audiences.

#### **IV. From 'stage Irish village' to 'weird wastes': *The Duchess of Coolgardie* and *To the West***

If Dampier had really wanted to strengthen the 'silken bond of friendship' between Australia and England, he should perhaps have opted for the strategy taken by the producers of *The Duchess of Coolgardie*, a production backed by Australian money, but designed specifically for London audiences (Figure 1). The play, written by actor-manager John Coleman under the pseudonym 'Euston Leigh and Cyril Clare', premiered at London's Drury Lane in 1896. It was entirely set in the Western Australian gold mining town of Coolgardie, and was conceived as an elaborate advertisement, financed by a Western Australian mining syndicate with the intention of interesting the British public in Australian gold mine shares. The opening night was attended by dozens of prominent Australians, many of who had a financial interest in the play. They proved themselves to be an enthusiastic audience and, in keeping with the reception of such spectacles back home, each succeeding scene of bush landscape was 'heartily cheered'.<sup>48</sup> It seems, however, that their appreciation may not have been entirely sincere. Back in Australia, press reports of the production admitted that the scenery failed to present a convincing representation of Coolgardie, or, indeed, of anywhere else in the country. The problem for the producers of the play was that, situated at the edge of the desert in an area of low, sandy hills and scrubland, the eponymous mining town was singularly lacking

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48. "The Duchess of Coolgardie": The New Drama at Drury Lane', *West Australian*, 7 November 1896, p. 12.

in picturesque appeal. The designers dealt with this challenge with a heavy dose of artistic licence. The result, according to Emily Soldene, reporting from London for her column in the Sydney newspaper, the *Evening News*, was something that ‘in its verdancy and general details’ was more like ‘a stage Irish village than anything approaching the sandy wastes of the modern Ophir’. It was, she wrote, ‘unconvincing, artificial, and like anything in the world, except Australia’.<sup>49</sup>

INSERT FIGURE 1 ABOUT HERE

Figure 1. “‘THE DUCHESS OF COOLGARDIE,’ THE NEW DRAMA AT DRURY LANE THEATRE’, *Illustrated London News*, 26 September 1896, p. 409. © Bridgeman Art Library.

It is not clear who was responsible for this misleading vision of the Australian west. Two well-known and experienced scenic artists, Robert Caney and J. Johnson, are named as the designers, together with ‘artists of the Stafford Studio’.<sup>50</sup> It was stated, moreover, that Julius M. Price, an artist affiliated to the *Illustrated London News* who was known to have spent time in Western Australia, was the scenic consultant for the play, although some reviewers wondered if his advice had been sought too late.<sup>51</sup> The stage directions are more detailed than those often found in melodrama and suggest a genuine attempt to create a distinctively Australian spectacle using native flora, albeit conveniently forgetting the particular conditions of Coolgardie. The opening for Act 1, Scene 2 is as follows:

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49. Emily Soldene, ‘London Week by Week’, *Evening News*, 31 October 1896, p. 3.

50. Programme in the Mander and Mitchenson Theatre Collection, University of Bristol.

51. Commenting on the production, one reviewer wrote that ‘... it would have been well to have taken the advice of Mr Julius M Price, whose local knowledge is extensive and accurate, but who was, we fear, consulted rather too late in the day’, “‘The Duchess of Coolgardie’”, p. 12.

The Wilderness. This scene, which occupies the whole stage, should indicate the wild shrub, dense foliage of the eucalypti and indigenous gum trees of the Australian regions. Practicable rushes should be set at back to enable the capt, Jerry and Bendigo Bill to hide behind.

The scene begins with characteristic MUSIC which should suggest the chirping of birds and murmuring of insects awakening from the repose and silence of night. The graduation of light conveys the impression that the day is breaking in the forest, and the passage of time from one day to the beginning of another is indicated by skilful manipulation of mediums, floats, borders, and limelights.

The flaming red sun slowly rises from the horizon.

Sybil: What a lovely spot! A perfect garden of ferns and flowers (looks around admiringly)<sup>52</sup>

Such a scene would presumably have worked to impress potential shareholders and flatter the Australian audience, while including some attractive local colour. However, the responses suggest that the spectacle as it was achieved on the night failed even to attain this prettified interpretation of its subject. Given the available evidence, we cannot be sure whether what appeared on stage was simply a failure on the part of scenic designers, consultants, and/or management, or whether it was a deliberate strategy in the interests of pleasing a particular public. Nevertheless, this episode and responses to it highlight some key issues concerning perceptions of the Australian landscape both at home and abroad.

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52. Euston Leigh and Cyril Clare (John Coleman), *The Duchess of Coolgardie* (London: Henry J. Drane, 1896), p. 28.

The English critics, who appear to have been unaware of the implausible nature of the settings, were positive in their appraisal. *Lloyds* newspaper found the scenery to be ‘exceedingly picturesque’ and ‘admirably painted’.<sup>53</sup> Such favourable accounts might be expected from critics who had no direct, or even indirect, experience of the Australian west. However, the Australian commentary reveals the degree to which even Australians regarded certain aspects of the native landscape as unrepresentable. While the Australian press remarked on the fantastical nature of Drury Lane’s version of Coolgardie, it was nevertheless generally felt that Coleman’s outlandish portrayal was a necessary fiction. ‘No doubt’, wrote a reviewer for the *West Australian*,

Australians would observe an excess of warmth in the local colour, and be disposed to marvel at the tropical vegetation of the bush ... But a moment’s reflection might serve to convince those disposed to be captious on such points, that after all Mr. Coleman and his company were not far wrong. Vraisemblance and truth to nature are one thing, dramatic effect and stage glamour are another. Although Australia has its picturesque portions they are not to be found in and around Coolgardie, where the dismal grey green of the sparse vegetation, and the dull brown of the sandy plains stretching as far as the eye can reach, are inexpressibly monotonous.<sup>54</sup>

This critic seemed to understand the thinking behind Drury Lane’s strategy, only expressing regret that the management had not thought to incorporate some more presentable aspect of the Australian west such as, for instance, Perth, ‘one of the most picturesque, not to say beautiful cities in the world’.<sup>55</sup> Other reviewers, though accepting the impossibility of portraying a truthful representation of Coolgardie and its environs on

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53. Review in *Lloyds* newspaper quoted in the advert for the play in ‘DRURY LANE THEATRE’, *Standard*, 23 September 1896, p. 4.

54. “‘The Duchess of Coolgardie’”, p. 12.

55. “‘The Duchess of Coolgardie’”, p. 12.



the stage of Drury Lane, used the opportunity to make humorous remarks at the expense of the British public, thereby creating a sense of solidarity with their knowing Australian readership, while casting the English as ignorant outsiders. Soldene, whose description of the production is quoted above, treated the readers of her *Evening News* column to some choice sarcastic comments about Drury Lane's 'topsy turvy' vision of Coolgardie. In her account of the opening night, Soldene, who had travelled extensively in Australia, recounted a conversation she claimed to have had with Lord Fingall, a member of the mining syndicate involved in mounting the play. Fingall, she wrote, had asked her what she thought of the play, Soldene replying '[w]ell ... it's none so dusty [as] Coolgardie'. 'Well, no', replied Fingall jokingly, 'we couldn't tell a baker from a sweep there, could we?'<sup>56</sup> In one sense this exchange offers a comment on the aesthetic capabilities of stage spectacle. It is implied that an accurate portrayal of Coolgardie would have been beyond the pale. Yet the wry, conspiratorial tone of the conversation between these interlocutors, both of whom had intimate knowledge of the area supposedly represented on stage, also drew a distinction between those who had experience of living in Australia (including, of course, Soldene's Australian readership) and the unsuspecting British public. Indeed, one Australian review referred to the 'blissfully ignorant' London audience, whom they considered to have been duped by a spectacle replete with scenes that 'could not fail to strike an Australian spectator as incongruous and laughable'.<sup>57</sup> Another recounted that the Prince of Wales had apparently been 'most interested in the West Australian scenes and mounting, and very anxious to ascertain whether [they] bore any resemblance to the real thing', thus portraying a member of the Royal Family as living in the same state of

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56. Emily Soldene, 'London Week by Week', *Evening News*, 9 November 1896, p. 3.

57. 'Amusements: Theatre Royal', *Chronicle*, 29 April 1899, p. 32. This is a review of Dampier's later production, referring back to the London version. See also *Sydney Morning Herald*, 31 October 1896, p. 5: '... people who know something about Western Australia even throw doubt upon the local colouring, and assert that the author or authors have drawn their ideas of the goldfields from certain old-fashioned works of fiction'.

ignorance as the rest of London's theatregoers.<sup>58</sup>

It seems that when international investment in Australian enterprise was at stake, there was no question of trying to get the London audience to understand the challenges and complexities of the colonial environment. While there was certainly an attempt at local colour, the real conditions of Coolgardie were regarded, by the Australian and British investors alike, as unsuitable for portrayal on the West End stage. Even the Australian press seemed to consider this an impossible prospect. Yet in reporting on Coleman's 'stage Irish village' from accounts sent by their London correspondents, the ignorance of the British public became the subject of some amusement, and thus an opportunity for the assertion of Australian difference.

Although it was generally acknowledged that Coleman could hardly have acted differently at Drury Lane, in the same year, on the other side of the world, Dampier premiered a mining play of his own, also featuring scenes in Coolgardie, which was promoted as an accurate realisation of this location, offering 'realistic scenes of this wild and weird country', with settings created from 'authentic sketches taken on the spot'.<sup>59</sup> The play, *To the West*, co-authored by Dampier and the novelist Kenneth Mackay, and premiered at Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney in February 1896, included an exact replica of the deck of the Ormuz, 'photographed for the purpose' (in the play, the ship is called the Westralian), the yard of Freemantle gaol, the exterior and interior workings of a goldmine, and, most notably, a desert.<sup>60</sup> Accounts of this last scene are of interest because although engagement with bush landscapes was by the 1890s already linked to the emergent sense of Australianess, the desert is thought to have remained, in Haynes's

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58. 'Mail News: OUR ANGLO-COLONIAL LETTER', *Chronicle*, 21 November 1896, p. 43.

59. Alfred Dampier and Kenneth Mackay, *To the West*, first performance Her Majesty's Theatre, Sydney, 8 February 1896. 'Authentic sketches taken on the spot by J. O. Anderson Esq.', in 'HER MAJESTY'S', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 8 February 1896, p. 12. 'Realistic scenes of this wild and weird country', in 'HER MAJESTY'S', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 February 1896, p. 2.

60. 'Dramatic Notes', *Mercury*, 8 February 1896, p. 2 (supplement).

words, a ‘gaunt skeleton in the colonial cupboard’ until the 1930s and ‘40s.<sup>61</sup> Haynes contends that the desert attracted only scientific interest in the work of those artists commissioned to record it by the various nineteenth-century trans-continental explorations, and that even this came to an end with the failure of the Burke and Wills expedition in 1860-1. Indeed, she argues that between the death of Burke and Wills and the modernist paintings of Hans Heysen in the 1930s, there *was* no visual representation of the desert: ‘the desert ceased to interest Australian artists for sixty years’ and ‘landscape art focussed, instead, on the pleasant and philosophically unchallenging Bush landscapes of the Heidelberg School’.<sup>62</sup> The desert remained, she writes, ‘virtually unpaintable’ until the advent of modernism, which, in addition to the introduction of colour film, and a gradual change in attitudes, enabled the ‘visual revolution’ that would transform it into a national icon.<sup>63</sup> Dampier’s staging of this terrain during the 1890s provides, then, an unusual treatment of this subject at a time when its representation was still controversial.

The desert scenes, designed by William Kinchella and Jack Ricketts, comprised Act 2, Scene 3, ‘Near the Great Salt Lake’ and Act 2, Scene 4, ‘Black Flag Plains’.<sup>64</sup> The play showed the hero Dick Stewart (played by Dampier) alone in the hostile landscape, becoming delirious and almost dying of thirst before being rescued by the heroine,

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61. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 88.

62. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 110. Also ‘the desert offered little interest to nineteenth-century artists, who generally regarded it as antithetical to artistic representation. Indeed, it represented a classic example of the rejection, even the invisibility, of a landscape that fails to conform to prevailing aesthetic expectations’; Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 87.

63. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 5. ‘Virtually unpaintable’, Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 89.

64. ‘Synopsis of Scenery and Incidents’, Alfred Dampier and Kenneth Mackay, *To the West, An Australian Drama in Five Acts*, His Majesty’s Theatre Sydney, 1896, text in the Mitchell Collection, Sydney.

Waratah Lorrimer, and an Aboriginal boy, Geebung.<sup>65</sup> Given the recent history of failed expeditions, this image would certainly have aroused bitter memories in the audience. Indeed, despite the fact that Stewart is rescued and finds gold in the desert, the scene seems to have been perceived as presenting too desolate an image. The critic of the *Sydney Morning Herald*, though describing it as ‘powerful’, considered Dampier to have taken this bleak episode too far, stating that ‘the painful scene was much too long drawn out’.<sup>66</sup>

Undeterred, Dampier attempted another desert scene two years later in his Australian version of Coleman’s *The Duchess of Coolgardie*. Dampier reportedly commissioned new scenery for its Australian premiere, which was, like that of *To the West*, advertised as having been ‘specially painted from scenes on the Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie fields’.<sup>67</sup> The critical response attests to the transformation worked on the ‘stage Irish village’ of the original London production.<sup>68</sup> A review of the production in the *South Australian Register* demonstrates Dampier’s continuing reference to Clarkian notions of the weird and haunted landscape:

The scene in the desert was a capital representation of the weird wastes of the Australian interior – a sort of dried-up bed of an inland sea. The chief

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65. The *Evening News* described a ‘very effective picture of a west Australian plain, in which the solitary human figure is that of Stuart’ [sic]. ‘Amusements: His Majesty’s Theatre: “To the West”’, *Evening News*, 10 February 1896, p. 6.

66. ‘AMUSEMENTS. HER MAJESTY’S – “TO THE WEST”’, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 February 1896, p. 7.

67. ‘The scenery has been specially painted from scenes on the Coolgardie and Kalgoorlie fields, and should prove interesting to those who have not visited the West’, ‘AMUSEMENTS’, *South Australian Register*, 22 April 1899, p. 7. It is likely that Dampier would have re-used the desert scenery from *To the West*.

68. The reviewer for the *Chronicle* stated that, having bought the rights to the play, Dampier had ‘at once set to work to excise all that was superfluous and incongruous, and to build up out of the resources of his own large experience a drama, which, in character, scene, and incident, more nearly approached the ideal of an Australian play’; see ‘Amusements: Theatre Royal’, *Chronicle*, 29 April 1899, p. 32.

characteristics were, of course, sand and sun, with a few stunted bushes and a forlorn tree here and there, looking like spectres on the horizon. A few swarms of flies would have completed the picture.<sup>69</sup>

Dampier clearly thought it untenable that a home audience should be presented with the kind of obviously phoney setting deemed suitable for the London production. Critics generally acknowledged the truth of the scenery; however, as the bathetic tone of the review quoted above suggests, they were not enthused by its appearance. Indeed, Dampier was considered to have chosen authenticity at the expense of aesthetic appeal. A reviewer for the *Sydney Morning Herald* stated that

... from a scenic point of view the Western Australian goldfields have few recommendations. The weird, the cheerless, and the ugly are predominant. Backgrounds which have served for the Sahara, or tracts in Central Asia would be interchangeable ... Of course, the theatre was well filled with people who had been to the West, and as a rule could think of nothing romantic in life as they found it there.<sup>70</sup>

For this critic the desert landscape was not only desolate, it also lacked any characteristic qualities that might mark it out as distinctively Australian. Perceived as interchangeable with too many other locations, it was considered as simply a hostile, visually unappealing environment with no apparent national significance.

Dampier's desert scenes seem to have missed their mark with the critics. That his intention was to portray this harsh environment as transcendently beautiful is clear from his staging instructions for *To the West*, which describe a setting 'almost as lurid as one of Turner's pictures. The sky vivid with colour'.<sup>71</sup> The corresponding scene in *The Duchess of*

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69. 'Amusements: Theatre Royal: "The Duchess of Coolgardie"', *South Australian Register*, 24 April 1899, p. 3.

70. 'Criterion Theatre: "The Duchess of Coolgardie"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 7 November 1898, p. 3.

71. Staging instructions for Act 2, Scene 3, Dampier and Mackay, *To the West*.

*Coolgardie* two years later would likely have offered a similarly colourful spectacle, yet the reviewer quoted above perceived only ‘the weird, the cheerless and the ugly’. Yet Dampier’s experiments are nevertheless worthy of consideration. We have tended to associate the perception of the desert as an intensely coloured environment with the aesthetic experiments of modern painting, and with new technologies such as colour film. These innovations are regarded as having captured the strange beauty of this environment in a new way, a visual reinvention concomitant with its symbolic transformation from ‘hideous blank’ to a site of spiritual enlightenment and, as Haynes terms it, ‘the symbolic blood-red heart of the continent’.<sup>72</sup> However, Dampier’s instructions reveal a much earlier engagement with the desert as an ambivalent landscape in which desolation is balanced with otherworldly beauty. We must, of course, be careful of over-stating the significance of Dampier’s treatment of this subject. His portrayal of the desert as a kind of hell on earth is of its time.<sup>73</sup> However, in focusing exclusively on the more obvious turning points of modernism and film, we have neglected to consider how the theatrical technology of this earlier period may have been used to explore changing attitudes towards the desert and other challenging landscapes.

## **V. Lights and shadows: *The Breaking of the Drought***

While home audiences applauded stage representations of what was distinctive and characteristic about the landscape, it appears that they were nevertheless unsettled when confronted with the hostility of certain environments. Bland Holt’s production *The Breaking of the Drought*, staged at Sydney Lyceum theatre in 1902, offered a successful

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72. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 161. For the origins of the term ‘hideous blank’, see Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 36.

73. Indeed, when asked by his rescuers where he has come from, Stewart/Dampier answers ‘Hell!’, Act 3, Scene 4, Dampier and Mackay, *To the West*.

solution to this problem, at least for local audiences.<sup>74</sup> Holt's was a uniquely dramatic strategy, alternating images of drought with heartening scenes of plenty. While balancing the mood of the play, Holt was also able to suggest the unique rhythms of the native environment.

Though *The Breaking of the Drought* would become one of the most popular plays about Australian life, an English playwright, Arthur Shirley, was responsible for the original script. Letters between Holt and his collaborators in the Bland Holt archive in the National Library of Australia reveal the process by which Shirley's original text, entitled *The Sinful City* and set in London, was localised for an Australian audience.<sup>75</sup> The Melbourne writer Edward Dyson was given the job of adapting the script. Rejecting the suggested title of *Sydney's Seamy Side* as 'artificial', he re-named it *The Breaking of the Drought*, and set the action against the drought that was currently ravaging New South Wales.<sup>76</sup> Thus, unlike the other examples discussed here, which were set in the pioneering days of the 1850s and '60s, the play as adapted by Dyson was set in the present time. The action follows the fortunes of a Squatting family, the Galloways, reduced to dire straits by the drought and by their spendthrift son who becomes embroiled in Sydney's 'fast set' and is incited by the villain, a city financier, to forge his father's name, thereby ruining the family. The sensation scene was a bush fire in which the prodigal son was rescued by the comic character, Damper, played by Holt himself. In the final scene, the arrival of the long awaited rains augur a better future, just as the family is saved by the intervention of Tom Wattleby, suitor to Marjorie Galloway, the daughter of the family. Eminently

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74. Bland Holt, *The Breaking of the Drought*, first performed at the Sydney Lyceum, 27 December 1902.

75. Allardyce Nicoll lists *The Sinful City* as co-authored with William Muskerry, performed at the Queen's Theatre, Leeds, 4 April 1902, and later performed as *A City of Sin*. Allardyce Nicoll, *English Drama 1900–1930: The Beginning of the Modern Period* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1973), p. 947.

76. Dyson does not explicitly state that he has invented the drought aspect of the plot, just that he is linking the family's troubles to the theme of drought. However, it seems to be a reasonable assumption that the idea came from Dyson. I have not been able to locate a copy of Shirley's original text.

topical, the drought also functioned as a metaphorical device. As Dyson wrote to Holt, 'You'll find I've made the old man look upon his trouble as a protracted Drought and speak of the dawning of better times as the passing of the dry spell. This will help carry the new title along if it pleases you'.<sup>77</sup>

The localised script presented a challenge to Holt's scenic designers. His usual practice was to adapt Drury Lane or other London successes recommended to him as suitable for Australian audiences by Shirley, who also acted as his London agent.<sup>78</sup> Scripts for these plays arrived with models, photographs and detailed instructions for achieving the sophisticated visual effects of the original production. In the case of a localised play like *The Breaking of the Drought*, however, scenic artists would have needed to start from scratch. Indeed, there was no precedent for the portrayal of drought on stage. Holt's decision to portray the subject was thus greeted with anticipation, and comments reveal an appreciation of the challenges of successfully staging such a scene. The remarks of the critic of the *Sydney Stock and Station Journal* signal the originality of the enterprise, and his faith in Holt's ability to successfully give form to a difficult (and devastating) subject:

I perceive that his chief trouble will be area: a stage, even with the aid of perspective, is very small, and drought covers such a wide area. Nevertheless, with the aid of limelight, bones and cartloads of sandy plain, Bland Holt can safely be relied on to do the drought justice'.<sup>79</sup>

The timing of the play was clearly designed to maximise the impact of its theme. It premiered on 27 December 1902, just as the Federation Drought, which had lasted throughout much of Australia for several years, was coming to an end. The first

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77. Letter from Edward Dyson to Bland Holt, 7 June 1902, Bland Holt Col., National Library of Australia [NLA].

78. Correspondence between Holt and Shirley in the Bland Holt Col., NLA.

79. "OUR NOTEBOOK By "Hamlet", *Sydney Stock and Station Journal*, 2 December 1902, p. 3. Dyson, too, expressed his confidence in Holt, writing 'I think the play will knock 'em, knowing how you will stage it'. Letter from Edward Dyson to Bland Holt, 7 June 1902, Bland Holt Col., NLA.



performance coincided with the coming of the rain to the parched landscape.<sup>80</sup> Cattle and sheep had died in their millions during the drought and the theme of a farmer brought low by the hostile climate would certainly have spoken to contemporary audiences. Holt, wrote one journalist, was attempting to [seize] the ‘psychological moment’.<sup>81</sup> In more general terms, in attempting to portray the subject of drought, Holt was engaging with a perennial problem of the Australian landscape: how to acknowledge its harshness and yet present it as a place in which settlers would wish to live. Holt’s approach was to alternate between scenes of desolation and plenty, balancing the hostility of the environment against its beauty.<sup>82</sup> His solution was in sharp contrast to portrayals of the landscape by outsiders that were perceived as having failed to acknowledge its unique temporal rhythms. Australian critics had complained, for instance, of English writer, actor and stage manager Wilson Barrett’s portrayal of the drought in his novel of 1904 set in western Queensland, *The Never-Never Land*.<sup>83</sup> The book was criticised for its ‘incomplete’ local colour, which they felt gave a misleading impression of the Australian climate. Such places, wrote the *Brisbane Courier*,

which two years ago were sun-smitten and bare, are now smiling with grass and herbage. God’s carpet of flowers gleams on the great Downs and by the long stretches of deep still water flowering trees colour the landscape and perfume the morning breezes. Our West has its alternations of feast and famine, and the author who paints only the latter is at fault.<sup>84</sup>

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80. ‘BREAKING OF THE DROUGHT’, *Cumberland Argus and Fruitgrowers Advocate*, 21 August 1920, p. 6.

81. ‘OUR SYDNEY LETTER (From our own correspondent)’, *Mercury*, 29 December 1902, p. 3.

82. *The Girl of the Never Never*, a melodrama by Jo Smith (1912) demonstrates this tendency to emphasise contrast: ‘What a glorious place it is – Terrible in its loneliness magnificent in its greatness. It repels you with its grandeur while it holds you with its clinging sweetness ... the colours of those flowers make the pattern of the Never Never carpet’. Text in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

83. Wilson Barrett’s play of the same name toured provincial English theatres in 1904.

84. ‘PUBLICATIONS RECEIVED’, *Brisbane Courier*, 2 July 1904, p. 14.

Wilson Barrett's account was deemed a false, outsiders' view for failing to acknowledge the alternating periods of feast and famine in a continent where, as Haynes has written, 'months of flooding may alternate with years of total drought', a pattern which only more long-term inhabitants would be able to witness first hand.<sup>85</sup> *The Breaking of the Drought* with its 'ever changing scenes' was duly praised for the authenticity of its portrayal of the Australian climate. The *Evening News* observed that it began by portraying a 'time of fertility before the dreary drought wrought its devastating task', the following scenes introduced 'a touch of gloom', which was ultimately relieved by the coming of rain at the end of the play.<sup>86</sup> The account in the *Sydney Morning Herald* similarly, noted the contrasting series of landscapes:

The curtain rises on the homestead of the station, the land presenting a picture of fertility, and signs of prosperity being apparent on every hand ... but a change comes o'er the face of the country, and the next scene shows a parched earth with the bleached bones of starved stock telling the story of loss and ruin.<sup>87</sup>

An illustration of the bushfire scene shows dense woodland, with fires sparking at different points and, as was remarked in reviews of the play, the bleached skeleton of an animal, victim of the drought (Figure 2). This scene was described by the *Sydney Morning Herald* as 'the most realistic and effective' of all, with 'burning trees and falling timber covering the stage'.<sup>88</sup> Bleak though this image would have been, as part of a larger climatic pattern, the harshness of the environment could be rendered acceptable to local audiences. While there is no record of *The Breaking of the Drought* being toured outside

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85. Haynes, *Seeking the Centre*, p. 2.

86. 'THE LYCEUM', *Evening News*, 27 December 1902, p. 2.

87. 'LYCEUM THEATRE: "THE BREAKING OF THE DROUGHT"', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 27 December 1902, p. 8.

88. 'LYCEUM THEATRE: "THE BREAKING OF THE DROUGHT"', p. 8. It is not clear how the bushfire scene was achieved. A review in the *Argus* referred to it 'as a fair replica of the real thing', 'Theatre Royal: "The Breaking of the Drought"', *Argus*, 9 June 1903, p. 6.

Australia, the controversy surrounding the film adaptation of 1920 demonstrates continuing concern about how the country's harsh climate might be understood (or, indeed, misunderstood) internationally. The film, directed by Franklyn Barrett and overseen by Holt himself, was shot using footage of real drought conditions and included scenes of a dust storm and emaciated sheep. Officials expressed concern about its potentially damaging effect internationally and threatened to ban the film, even or local release, on the grounds that it might be 'damaging to the commonwealth'.<sup>89</sup>

INSERT FIGURE 2 ABOUT HERE

Figure 2. The Bushfire Scene from Arthur Shirley's, *The Breaking of the Drought*, produced by Bland Holt at the Theatre Royal, Melbourne, *Weekly Times*, 27 June 1903, State Library Victoria.

## VI. Conclusion

In looking beyond text and instead foregrounding the iconography of these lost landscapes, localised settings emerge as far more than superficial dressing. Given the significance of landscape to Australian national identity, its presence on stage transformed the plays in question, investing them with a range of local meanings. Though titles featuring Australian locations, whether localised from London productions or not, were certainly under-represented in this period, they nevertheless enabled ground breaking developments in the representation of the Australian landscape, and of scenic

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89. However, in 1920 when the film version of *The Breaking of the Drought*, directed by Franklyn Barrett and overseen by Holt himself, was shot using footage of real drought conditions, officials expressed concern about its potentially damaging effect internationally and threatened to ban the film, even or local release, on the grounds that it might be damaging to the commonwealth. Ian Burn, 'Popular Landscape Between the Wars' [1982], in *Dialogue: Writings in Art History*, ed. by Ian Burn (Sydney: Allen and Unwin, 1991), p. 47.

design more generally.<sup>90</sup> As these examples show, landscape spectacle offered popular audiences the opportunity to explore nascent ideas of national identity and negotiate a relationship with their unique environment. The global traffic in plays during this period may suggest a level of homogeneity in the entertainment offered to audiences of different cultural and geographic contexts. However, as Dampier's adaptation of Coleman's Drury Lane production *The Duchess of Coolgardie* demonstrates, the same play might present a very different set of ideas simply by the introduction of new scenery. While Drury Lane's lush and verdant rendering of Coolgardie was deemed suitable for London spectators, Dampier thought a more accurate portrayal of the Australian west appropriate for a home audience. It seems, moreover, that Coleman and his Australian backers were wise in their decision to steer clear of any troubling realism in their portrayal of Coolgardie. British audiences might comprehend an image of Australia as a sort of hell on earth – this was the portrayal presented in Barrett's *Never-Never Land*, the novel that so irritated Australian reviewers (and which toured the English provinces as a play in 1904) – however, such an image would not have served the purposes of the mining syndicate behind the play whose main aim was to attract British investment. On the other hand, when Dampier tried to share with London audiences the ambivalent image of the Australian environment created for *Robbery Under Arms* by Tischbauer and others, he seems to have missed his mark. As the lukewarm critical responses demonstrate, the image of the Australian landscape as it was developed for home audiences was too complex and, indeed, too local to export successfully. Dampier's scenic designs sometimes challenged even home audiences in their engagement with difficult subjects such as desert environments. As the discussions prompted by the film version of *The Breaking of the Drought* show, the desire to confront the alienating aspects of the

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90. On the under-representation of Australian locations on the Australian stage, see Fotheringham, *Australian Sporting Drama*, p. 123.

environment conflicted with concerns about the international perception of the Australian climate, anxieties that increased in the patriotic fervour following Australia's participation in the First World War.<sup>91</sup>

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91. Ian Burn has discussed the portrayal of Australia as a 'pastoral utopia' in the patriotic period following the First World War; see Ian Burn, 'Popular Landscape Between the Wars', p. 46.